

The Museum of Modern Art

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Biographical Note on Walker Evans

Walker Evans was born in St. Louis in 1903, and raised in suburban Chicago. He attended Phillips Academy, Andover, and Williams College. In 1926 he went to Paris and studied at the Sorbonne. After he returned to New York he held a variety of jobs until he became seriously committed to photography in the late 20's.

In 1931 he was asked by Lincoln Kirstein to document Victorian houses around Boston. In the same year his work, with that of Ralph Steiner, and Margaret Bourke-White, was exhibited at the John Becker Gallery, and in 1932 it was shown at the Julien Levy Gallery, along with that of George Platt Lynes. His close friends at this time included Kirstein, the writers Hart Crane and James Agee, and the painter Ben Shahn.

In 1933 Evans made the photographs for Carlton Beal's book The Crime of Cuba and his photographs of 19th Century houses were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in an exhibition directed by Kirstein.

From 1935 until 1937 he was one of the photographers who documented rural America for the Farm Security Administration (and its predecessor, the Resettlement Administration). His work, both before and during this period, exerted a strong influence on the direction and achievement of that remarkable photographic group.

In 1936, while on leave from the FSA, Evans made the photographs for Let Us Now Praise Famous Men by James Agee and Walker Evans (Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1941, reissued in 1960; paperback edition Ballantine Books, New York, 1966). In his preface, Agee said that his text was written to be read aloud, and to be read continuously as music is listened to or a film is watched. The photographs, he said, are not illustrative. "They and the text are co-equal, mutually independent and fully collaborative."

(more)

In 1938, The Museum of Modern Art presented a one-man show of Evans' work and published Evans' now classic American Photographs, widely acclaimed again when it was reissued in 1962.

In 1940, Evans was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in photography. After the War, he served as an associate editor for Fortune magazine until 1965. Among the photographic essays he conceived and produced for Fortune were: Along the Right of Way (American landscapes seen through a train window); The Wreckers (the ceremony of tearing down a house); Before they Disappear (freight car emblems); The Pitch Direct (Sidewalk markets in New York); People and Places in Trouble (unemployment); and The Auto Junkyard. During this period, in 1948 and 1964 he was given one-man shows at the Art Institute of Chicago.

In 1966 The Museum of Modern Art exhibited the secret series of anonymous subway riders Evans had made years earlier in 1938 and 1941. John Szarkowski, Director of the Museum's Department of Photography, calls these a "kind of virtuoso piece, in which the photographer's control over his subject had been reduced to a minimum..." At the same time, 89 of these pictures were published in Many Are Called (Houghton Mifflin, 1966) along with an essay about them James Agee had written in 1940.

In 1966 Evans also published Message from the Interior (Eakins Press) which contained a brief essay by Szarkowski.

Evans picture essays have also appeared in numerous periodicals including Hound and Horn, Architectural Forum, Life, Harpers Bazaar, and Du.

In addition to remaining active as a photographer, Evans has been a visiting professor at Yale University since 1964. He and his wife live in Old Lyme, Conn.

Additional information and photographs available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, and Mark Segal, Assistant, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, New York 10019. Tel: (212) 956-7501 (7296).